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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001128

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (LAWRENCE)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/2015

TAGS: PREL TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: REGIONAL SUPPORT FOR ADVANCING THE PEACE PROCESS

REF: SECSTATE 97599

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) In a meeting on several topics May 26, the Ambassador delivered the points on Arab League regional support for advancing the peace process to MFA Secretary of State for American and Asian Affairs Chtioui. The Ambassador covered points reftel, stressing that the time was right to move aggressively on these issues and requesting Tunisia's support and leadership. The Ambassador noted, for example, that both President Ben Ali and Minister Ben Yahia had talked to US representatives about re-opening the Israeli interest section here. He asked Tunisia to move forward and re-establish that relationship this year.

¶2. (C) Chtioui said the GOT agreed that the window for quick progress in the peace process was now open but would not stay open long without positive steps from the Israeli side to consolidate Abbas' leadership and give him something to show for his cooperative approach. Tunisia and "all Arab governments" think Abbas is a good man and a good leader and should be supported, but he might not last if he cannot demonstrate that his approach delivers results soon. The process must be speeded up. The Ambassador noted that one way to speed up the process would be to open Israeli interests sections, and Tunisia should show leadership in this. Chtioui said that it was not the right time for that, and that "we should see some progress first."

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked if Tunisia thought Israeli disengagement from Gaza would change the dynamic in the peace process. Chtioui said it would be seen as a very positive step, but that it should only be considered as one step in implementation of the road map. The Ambassador reminded her that President Bush had made it clear that that was the U.S. policy, too, and said that we hoped Gaza disengagement would launch further progress on the road map. Chtioui replied that implementation of the road map must move more rapidly. She also noted that Abbas' first stop after his current U.S. and Canada visit is to be Tunisia. She said that Abbas himself says that he is under "Tunisian influence and respects our President," and that Tunisia would "be in the front, even encouraging other Arab countries (regarding re-establishing ties with Israel)" if clear progress were made toward helping him.

¶4. (C) An aside: Regarding the Arab League boycott, Chtioui noted twice that this is "an old story" for Tunisia and that the country was long beyond that. She made no comment regarding closing the boycott office, however.

¶3. (C) Comment: Tunisia is genuinely interested in helping Abbas succeed and would probably be among the first to welcome the Israelis back. Tunisia will not be the first, however, at least not without other Arab or Arab League cover. They will not buck the Arab consensus that "rewarding" Israel depends on "positive Israeli steps" in the peace process.

HUDSON